Review of Catherine Millet, *Dalí and Me*
Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008, 182 pp.

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Catherine Millet and Salvador Dalí? Merely pairing these two names causes something of an electric charge. Those familiar with the French curator and writer's book, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* (2002), might expect her more recent project that engages with the famous Spanish surrealist to be an opportunity for the author to muse further about her personal sexual adventures, obsessions, and fetishistic desires through Dalínian inspirations. Not so. Millet's book, *Dali and Me* (2008), is an academic work that examines the famous artist through the lens of literary criticism, focusing on the presence of autobiography in his well-known writings.[1] Much of the book is given over to detailed psychoanalytic examinations of Dalí's self-representations in various works of fiction and non-fiction throughout his career*: The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (1942)*, Hidden Faces* (1942), *Le Mythe tragique de l' Angélus de Millet* (1963), *The Dairy of a Genius* (1964), and *The Unspeakable Confessions of Salvador Dalí* (1973). Shortly into the text it becomes clear that Millet's personality and subjective use of literary criticism make her a fitting choice to analyze one of the most misunderstood artists of the twentieth century.

The impetus for *Dalí and Me* was a combination of Millet's re-encounters with the artist's visual works through recent retrospectives, as well as a round of scholarly projects investigating feces and contemporary art, which led her inevitably to reconsider Dalí's fascination/obsession with scatology. The book grew out of a series of lectures the author presented on the artist over the course of four years, and its organization loosely reflects this fact. Millet acknowledges openly the debt to her autobiography in the layout of *Dalí and Me*, as well as the fact that her first book

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found such a "broad echo" with readers.[2] This "echo" produced an endless play of psychoanalytic interpretations of Millet's "self" through readings by "others," and proved to be the doorway into her understanding of Dalí's own self-projected identity as it manifested itself in his autobiographical writings. Among the many complexities involved is the way the Spanish artist played with the relationship between his own constructions and those versions of his public "self" manipulated by contemporaries writing about his life. This led to what Dalí referred to as "collective participation" in the public construction of the artist, which relieved the anxiety of having to cope with the "excesses of one's personality."[3] (Especially intriguing about this approach is Millet's discussion of the artist's openness to how others portrayed him, even the manner through which Dalí allowed his "I" and the "he" from others to become fused in popular culture). Thus, Millet calls for a halt to the search for a "real" Dalí, claiming instead that he is right in front of us – or as she describes, his identity is akin to his disorienting hallucinatory paintings of the 1930's that "contain several images that are not arranged one behind the other, like theatrical backdrops, but intertwined in a single surface."[4] In other words, we should navigate this disperse and contradictory field rather than attempt to arrange (and even penetrate) his appearances in a sequential fashion that might eventually lead to some sort of "final" and "authentic" Dalí hiding behind these popular versions.

The opening section of the book, "Exhibition," describes the unique opportunity Dalí's writings present to critics interested in understanding the artist's sexuality, whether accessible through overt imagery conjured up in his writing or sublimated in his narratives and literary style. Unlike other well-known modern artists, Millet sees Dalí's consistent presentation of information (both biological and sexual) about his everyday self in his autobiographical works not as gratuitous and/or a means of differentiation but as sobering reminder that genius is a construct.[5] Dalí is not so extraordinary, according to Millet, and we should remember this fact in our assessment of his personality. Typical of Millet's honesty and raciness is the example of Dalí's close examination and fascination with his feces in *The Diary of a Genius*. Rather than approach this as an eccentric genius-type act by an artist (mythmaking) with an unusual fixation on the scatological, Millet brings us back to reality by asking a hard, but honest question: as uncomfortable and embarrassing as it may sound, is turning around to examine one's feces in a toilet really all that unusual? Could it be that Dalí makes public an "unspeakable confession," one that many of us, according to Millet, do to reassure ourselves that we are physiologically sound and to offer a brief respite from the anxiety of ill health? Or, with regard to the artist's scatological imagery, is he truly a bizarre and perverse subject, or is he just brutally honest? Millet feels it is important to remind readers that, generally speaking, humans are fascinated with flat-

ulence and excrement – or at least amused by it. These types of passages are few and far between in *Dalí and Me*, and when Millet does offer up intimate "confessions" such as those mentioned above they appear at places pertinent to the discussion and buttress rather than detract from the interpretations under consideration. In broader terms, the significance of this first section of the book involves a shift in methodological practice. Millet wants to avoid symbolic over-interpretation in the search for meaning in Dalí's writings and visual art. She encourages those with psychoanalytic approaches to put away their "de-mystificatory arsenal" and allow for the fact that these are in fact the actual workings of Dalí's day-to-day mind, rather than symbolic equivalences.[6] For Millet, the self-proclaimed "genius" is still just one of us.

To remark on all of the various interpretative wanderings over the course of the next several chapters of this book would be an enormous task. Without question, her discussion of his 1942 novel, *Hidden Faces*, is the standout of the entire book, as it provides great insight into a much-neglected work and reveals its close correspondence to the artist's biography, method of working, and psychological sublimations. Other contributions include the author's astute ability to analyze Dalí's writings as indicators of his psychic constitution. One highlight of this approach is Millet's assessment that Dalí's literary style is informed directly by his obsessions with minutia and detail (a sensitivity of the artistic mind) and also his cinematographic vision. Moreover, Millet claims that Dalí's great imaginative powers, emphasis on isolation and dramatic scenarios involving voyeurism in his writings, and his narcissistic behavior closely associates with his masturbatory habits. While this last statement might read here as an interpretative liberty taken by the author through abstruse psychoanalytic theory, in Millet's defense the passage in the text comes across convincingly through hard evidence and sound use of critical theories. The last highpoint in the text is the lengthy discussion of "dedifferentiation" via the work of Anton Ehrenzweig, where Millet presents convincing justifications for Dalí's unique position outside of the accepted avant-garde community at mid-century. By working in a manner that disassembles the oppositional framework of modern practice and embraces paradox, Dalí emerges from this discussion as an artist with the potential to join the ranks of Marcel Duchamp and others whose approaches foreshadowed the eventual postmodern dismantling of modernist thought.

Millet's book began as a series of lectures, and at times this fact shows itself in sections of the text. Structurally, the text as a whole relies on numerous minor headings within very large chapters and this has the effect of lessening the impact of some of her interpretations and subjective wanderings. That said, I came to understand that Millet leaves the reader to open and close their own doors to topics within the text, but I was left somewhere between charmed and frustrated by this approach.

One specific element that detracts from the strength of her interpretations occurs when the discussions turn from literary criticism and psychoanalysis to focus instead on more art historical analyses of Dalí's work. Millet seems to lose some depth in these sections, and the discussions lack the art historical backbone necessary to make her observations and interpretations carry weight. This is especially true of the long passage in chapter two regarding "visual obsession" and also the passage related to Yves Klein; the latter left me wondering how effectively it contributed to the larger topic of the chapter and the book as a whole.

Dalí and Me injects a fresh critical strategy into the recent spate of scholarship that turns with more interest towards Dali's literary output. As a work of literary criticism and psychoanalysis informed by a post-Structuralist approach to texts, *Dalí and Me* stands in rather unique and unfamiliar interpretative territory. Millet's subjectivity, which runs from racy auto-erotic admissions to more general claims about human behavior, is consistently grounded in psychoanalytic theory and never crosses the line into self-indulgent ramblings, and that is its best strength. Throughout the entire book Millet throws out fascinating statements in passing about Dalí that could easily serve as starting points for lengthier investigations (and this is a testament to the power of such an uncommon approach to the artist). The book is a welcome addition to the scholarship on the Spanish artist that challenges the view that he "fell from grace" after his surrealist period, and Millet makes it clear in several passages in the text that it is Dalí's penchant for paradox that has made it so difficult for critics and art historians to praise him within a modernist program. Dalí is, for Millet, an artist who transcends contradictions and enters a space that we are just starting to acknowledge, understand, and respect. *Dalí and Me* presents us with a new face for Dalí, but rather than have to pit this appearance against existing ones we should let it stand as one more addition to how we are re-visioning the artist. Miller recognizes that Dalí was a pluralistic artist who deserves to be approached pluralistically. As she states near the end of her book, "At best we can hope to grasp the most possible of these appearances, add them together, superimpose them and try to synthesize them, but we will only ever gather shards of the real person."[7]

Millet's *Dalí and Me* stands as an important contribution to the growing scholarship on Dalí that seeks to revise the artist's position within the history of modern art (and literature!), especially with regard to his artistic output in the years following World War II. It not only champions the artist's work produced outside the boundaries of surrealism, it also makes the argument that the artist was perhaps as talented with pen as he was with brush. The methodologies employed in *Dalí and Me* are a fresh and welcome alternative to the more standardized and stable approaches to studying Dalí. Shaking up the mechanisms of interpretation is just what Dalí scholar-

ship needs in the twenty-first century, and *Dalí and Me* rattles it loudly.

1 The French edition was released in 2005 (Èditions Gallimard, Paris), and the English edition appeared in 2008.
2 Catherine Millet, *Dalí and Me* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2008), 171.
3 Ibid., 172.
4 Ibid., 33.
5 Millet hints at the idea that Dalí may have been conscious of the reactive nature of such descriptions. She states, "There is one point on which I disagree with Dalí. Here is the justification he gives in the prologue to *The Diary of a Genius*: 'This book will prove that the daily life of a genius, his sleep, his digestion, his ecstasies, his nails, his colds, his blood, his life and death are essentially different from those of the rest of mankind.'" Millet, 23.
6 Ibid., 21.
7 Ibid., 168.